

ALFREDO ORIANI: LIFE AND CHARACTER

BY

ANGELINA ROSALIA PIETRANGELI

B. A., Lake Forest College, 1926

A. M., University of Illinois, 1928

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ITALIAN
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1944

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AN ABSTRACT

No adequate understanding and evaluation of the literary work of Alfredo Oriani (1852-1909) is possible without adequate understanding and evaluation of his life and character. This is particularly true because Oriani was an ego-centric individual, whose work was necessarily nurtured upon himself, so that much of what he wrote is partly a reflection of himself, partly a reflection of his own picture of himself.

So obvious is this interrelation of his life and character with his work that many articles and books have concentrated primarily upon his personality. But into the writing of these works, emotionalism and political partisanship have entered to a confusing degree.

A critical study of this existing biographical material is the first step, and a most important one, to a dispassionate estimate of Oriani. To the impartiality with which this study had to be made, two fortuitous circumstances contributed: my living in a country in which admiration of Fascism and of Fascist gods is not mandatory, and my own primary interest in the artist rather than in the political theorist, which made controversial political issues of secondary interest.

The war made access to all the material impossible, but enough was at hand with which to make this preliminary study, which can be rechecked in times of peace. What would have been invaluable were the letters and notebooks of Oriani; unfortunately, these have never been printed *in toto*, and photo-static reproductions were out of question. Happily, many of the biographers of Oriani quote long excerpts, which, read without bias, often proved illuminating.

The method used in this attempt to establish a clearer presentation of the truth was simple enough: a critical study of the different biographical works, first, to discern the underlying premises and prejudices of the writers, and second,

to note and evaluate contradictions, variations, and, equally important, omissions. What seemed most probable was emphasized by its inclusion in the main body of the text. Contradictions and questionings of the text were placed in the footnotes and, thus, are readily accessible for further examination and possible emendation.

The violent enthusiasm aroused by Oriani's personality in those who fell under his spell is a tribute. The first group of writers who wrote after his death (men like Donati¹ and Cardelli²) were so fanatically eager to win recognition for the "maestro" that they overshot their mark and ended in uncritical, almost hysterical praise.

They were joined in like uncritical praise by men (like Corradini³ and Federzoni⁴) who, dedicated to Nationalism, were eager to form a political party to lead Italy to greater glory. These men, finding in Oriani's dream of a great Italy, in his adherence to the African enterprise, and in his vague but ringing appeal to an "ideal revolt" support for their own program, used his name as a banner. They offer the first traces of the political after-life of Oriani.

The uncritical passion of the writings of these two groups inevitably aroused skeptical opposition. The personality of Oriani, strong enough to evoke worship in some, was also strong enough to evoke dislike, even hatred, in others. In their desire to modify the extravaganzas of the earlier groups, men like Serra⁵ and Ambrosini⁶ moved to almost equally uncritical denigration.

¹ L. Donati, *La Tragedia di Oriani (Albori d'immortalità)* (Ferrara: A. Taddei e Figli, 1919).

² See particularly F. Cardelli, *Oriani, la vita e le opere* (Bologna: Licinio Cappelli, 1939).

³ E. Corradini, *La Guerra lontana* (Milano: Treves, 1911).

⁴ L. Federzoni (Giulio de Frenzi, pseud.), *Un Eroe, Alfredo Oriani* ("Biblioteca della Rivista di Roma," I, ed. A. Lombroso; Roma: Rivista di Roma, 1910).

⁵ See particularly R. Serra, *Epistolario*, a cura di Luigi Ambrosini, Giuseppe de Robertis, Alfredo Grilli (Firenze: F. Le Monnier, 1934), *passim*, and *Scritti*, Vol. II, a cura di G. de Robertis e A. Grilli (Firenze: Felice Le Monnier, 1938), which contains "Romanzi di Oriani," pp. 273-288 by Serra alone and "Abbozzo di un saggio su Alfredo Oriani," pp. 289-372 by Serra and L. Ambrosini.

⁶ See particularly L. Ambrosini, "Alfredo Oriani e la Lotta politica in Italia," *La Voce*, April, 1910, pp. 299-300, 302, 305-306.

With Fascism came a development that was curious but not surprising. This movement, which had begun with pride in its rebellious "giovinezza," once in power sought to legitimize that power by adding to force the strength of whatever tradition it could borrow or invent. The adoption of Oriani as a pre-Fascist was made the easier by the presence of former Nationalists among the leaders of the Fascists. Having adopted Oriani to serve their own ends, the Fascists (like Pentimalli⁷ and Mussolini⁸) rewarded him posthumously by lauding him without reservation—a gesture all the more happy as it permitted the lauding of Fascism at the same time.

Occasional relief in the midst of this wild adoration and wild denunciation is to be found in articles by men of intellectual integrity and of balanced judgment (like Croce⁹ and Calcaterra¹⁰). There is also the interesting case of one biographer (Bianchi¹¹) who wrote a life of Oriani under the auspices of the National Institute of Fascist Culture. The work that he did is some of the best and most thorough that has been done, but the critic, caught in the dilemma of writing for a Fascist institution on a man whom he could not admire fervently enough, tried for the most part to solve his problem by seeking to establish facts without accepting the responsibility of deriving from these facts their conclusions.

Out of the many writings, five particularly suggestive pictures of Oriani emerge: as a man of a pride so exaggerated that it even gave to his works the aura of genius (Serra¹²); as a thief laden down with the booty of other men's thoughts

⁷G. Pentimalli, *Alfredo Oriani - studio critico* (Firenze: La Voce, 1921).

⁸B. Mussolini, "Prefazione" to A. Oriani, *La Rivolta ideale*, Vol. XIII of *Opera omnia*, a cura di Benito Mussolini (30 vols.; Bologna: Licinio Cappelli, 1923-1933).

⁹See particularly B. Croce, "Alfredo Oriani," *La Letteratura della nuova Italia: Saggi critici* (4 vols., 3rd ed. rev., "Scritti di storia letteraria e politica," III-VI; Bari: Gius. Laterza e Figli, 1929), III, 227-258, and "Oriani postumo," *La Critica*, XXXIII (1935), 181-188.

¹⁰C. Calcaterra, "Luigi Donati - *La tragedia di Oriani* (*Albori d'immortalità*)" (Review), *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, LXXVII (1921), 61-103.

¹¹G. B. Bianchi, *Alfredo Oriani - La Vita* ("Biblioteca di cultura politica," a cura dell'istituto nazionale di cultura fascista; Messina: Giuseppe Principato, 1938).

¹²Serra, *Epist.*, p. 299.

(Ambrosini¹³); as a "writer-athlete" (Borgese¹⁴); as a prophet (the Nationalists and the Fascists); and as a neglected genius of tragic life and of superhuman nobility (the Orianists).

To a certain degree, Serra was right in emphasizing the pride of Oriani. Pride may well explain Oriani's romantic refusal to adjust himself to the reality about him. Pride assured him that he was the equal, if not the superior, of his more fortunate contemporaries; it sustained him in the belief that the world which neglected him in his lifetime must finally acknowledge him. But when Serra said that nothing else existed beyond this pride, he said too little. Pride alone will not explain, for instance, the three novels of the later period which are the best work of Oriani.

Ambrosini's slashing attack, though understandable, is, in the final analysis, a mistaking of the purposes and methods of Oriani and, therefore, not to be taken too seriously. That Oriani used the works of other men without careful acknowledgment of his indebtedness was due not to a desire for undeserved praise, but rather to faulty technique in a man who was at no time, and never desired to be, the careful scholar. In the case of the *Lotta politica* (Ambrosini's point of attack), Oriani, eager to consider historical events as the basis for political action in his own time, had no wish to be the well-documented historian of those events, but rather sought to read out of facts garnered by others the implications important for his times. Likewise, in many of his fictional works, Oriani took themes from other writers or even from himself. But it was never done with the intent to deceive the reader, rather with the far more interesting if somewhat naive intent to prove himself more clever or more psychologically true in his latest treatment of the material.

Borgese's curt phrase, the "writer-athlete," suffers from the attempt to subsume too much under too little. Its usefulness lies in pointing out, first, Oriani's love for monologue (his insistence upon holding the center of the stage, his refusal to consider the opinions of others as valuable, his

¹³Ambrosini, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁴See particularly G. A. Borgese, "Alfredo Oriani," *La Vita e il libro* (3 vols., Milano: Fratelli Bocca, 1910-1913), I, 452-460.

eagerness to regard all communication as a silencing of his opponent) and, second, the carry-over of this quality in his writing.

To the Nationalist and Fascist interpretations of Oriani as prophet the objections are obvious enough. The erection of a man into a symbol always falsifies the truth of a man, as witness the artificiality of Corradini's *La Guerra lontana*. That various passages in Oriani's works may be interpreted as prophecies of the first world war or of the coming of Mussolini contributes little to the stature of Oriani, particularly when the writings of other men of the period can be interpreted similarly with equal validity.

The part of this study that was based upon a critical reading of the Orianists turned out, possibly because many had known him personally, to be most rewarding. The search for the core of truth in the fulsome compliment demanded a delicate weighing of imponderables, a task, therefore, perhaps too dependent upon subjective interpretation but one which can be given more objectivity by a later checking of these results against a careful study of the literary works of Oriani. This much can be argued, that, in place of the incredible apotheosis of the Orianists, a living figure emerged—a man whose life, like the Salavin of Duhamel's *Confession de minuit*, while almost completely devoid of action, is strangely vivid in its troubling suggestion of a significance that seeks to be understood.

There have been writers who have denied the neglect of Oriani by his contemporaries, but the superficial facts tend to justify the assertion of the Orianists. The work of his whole life received but a slim reward—a handful of private letters lauding his genius, a serious early study by Panzacchi, two attacks by Scarfoglio and Crivellucci, an urbane portrait by De Amicis, a few evenings of dramatic success, and one really important study by Croce.

On the tragedy of Oriani much has been written and very elaborately, indeed. However, this tragedy is commonplace enough—the great discrepancy between a man's dreams, ambitions, and efforts and the reward he found in his life-

time. The domestic tragedy which Oriani himself (and others after him) considered desperately important seems to a detached observer a singularly banal and rather sordid affair, of which perhaps the most remarkable feature is the idealization it came to assume through the importance given it by Oriani.

Of Oriani's super-human nobility of character one may have doubts without being too carping a critic. He was melancholy, and he prided himself upon it as the distinguishing mark of the great man—but such a belief can only tend to an artificial cultivation and exaggeration of melancholy. With disappointment, old age, and illness, this melancholy was heightened into morbidity, so that pettiness, irritability, and envy of more fortunate men gave it overtones that belie the nobility upon which the Orianists insist.

He lacked a sense of humor and essential kindliness. There are those who thought him too great and too serious for humor, but the truth seems to have been that he was too ego-centric. Revelatory is the cutting wit and sarcasm he often employed, for it was always based on his judging an inferior from his own elevated plane. His kindliness, much insisted upon by Cenni,¹⁵ is, upon careful examination, rather perfunctory in nature; even here, the evidence shows an Oriani too incapable of self-forgetfulness to be truly capable of kindliness.

That those who knew him were convinced of his greatness should be balanced, first, against the fact that nature had endowed him with the physique and manner of greatness, and, second, against the fact that he himself was thoroughly convinced of it, and that his own reiteration of that greatness seems many times to have satisfied his hearers to the extent of excusing them from any such serious examination of that belief as would have been involved in a dispassionate study of his works.

Of his personal incorruptibility there can be no doubt; poverty but strengthened him in his disdain for material

¹⁵G. Cenni, *Il Dramma di Alfredo Oriani - Vita di un precursore* (Ravenna: Edizioni S. T. E. R. M., 1935).

rewards that could be gained only with the sacrifice of absolute honesty. Desire for money, therefore, was an unimportant factor in keeping him at his long and arduous task of writing. That he was attracted to writing in the beginning is probably to be explained, first, by the hold that his early romantic readings had over him in his formative period, second, by the fact that a career in writing must often seem the answer to a young man with a love for words and a hunger for fame. The desire for fame *per se* would seem to explain the wide variety of fields that he attempted with amazing confidence. The shocking qualities of his early works are easily understandable as based not only on the obvious, if youthful, premise that to shock is the privilege and the mark of genius, but also on the realization that to shock is a quick way of winning an audience. His social, political, and historical works were based not only on the dreams that he had for Italy, but also on an unsatisfied yearning for the active political life that (though he was utterly unsuited for it, as his various adventures in actual politics proved) would have given him honor in his own country. Journalism and the stage attracted him inevitably because of the great and immediate audience both fields provide. Fame undoubtedly was the spur, though it will not account for all—not, for instance, for *La Disfatta* and the three best novels.

Several factors not emphasized by previous biographers seem worth keeping in mind. For instance, it is well to remember that some of his personal traits are traits common to the Romagnol character: a certain provinciality, a tendency towards conservatism with, at the same time, the desire to be individualistic in politics, a great faith in the fatherland and a love of oratory.

Likewise, in considering his works, it is imperative to note his basic indifference to the writings of other men. This indifference, the smallness of his private library, the fact that, despite his reiterated admiration for Hegel, he was content to read about Hegel rather than to read him, suggests that Oriani did very little serious reading after his university days. Caution, therefore, is necessary in discussing the influence of other men upon him.

Among the accidents of his personal life much stress has been laid upon the unhappy effect that his parents' neglect of him had upon his life. Perhaps more important would be a stressing of the incompatible nature of his parents and the effect that such a divided heritage had upon him and his work. That there may have been in Oriani more of his father than most biographers have noted may account for the respect and tenderness Oriani felt for his father after the latter's death.

Furthermore, since love is a predominating theme in Oriani's fiction, it is important to bear in mind the fact that Oriani, in his dealings with women, was always the complete provincial, more at ease with the illiterate woman than with the cultivated one, and that his own experiences with women were far from being either extensive or intensive.

Lastly, it may be valid also to suggest that his deathbed conversion, which to Croce and to Serra was only a last unfortunate pose and to Benso¹⁶ the slow but inevitable culmination of ideas pondered over a life-time, may have been sincere enough but much more simple in explanation than these writers have suggested. It may well have been the final weary yielding of a sick, unhappy man to the solemn rites of a church that promised him peace, at long last, in God.

¹⁶L. Giulio Benso, *Il Sentimento religioso nell'opera di Alfredo Oriani* (Roma: Libreria Ed. "Bilychnis," 1918).

VITA

Angelina Rosalia Pietrangeli, born in Quincy, Massachusetts, on May 1, 1907, received her elementary and secondary school education in the Kenosha Public Schools, Kenosha, Wisconsin. She was graduated, in 1926, with the degree of B. A. from Lake Forest College, Lake Forest, Illinois, and, in 1928, with the degree of M. A. from the University of Illinois. Her principal fields of study have been Romance Languages (Italian, French, and Spanish) and English.

